

# ANNALES

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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REFLEXIVITY IN THE FRAMEWORK OF WIDER SOCIETAL TRENDS AND CYCLES: THE CASE OF SLOVENIA IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

*The article analyses the decline of reflexivity in Slovenia based on four waves of a national survey conducted between 2018 and 2024. The findings reveal a consistent reduction in reflexivity levels, contradicting the linear expectations of modernisation trends of individualisation, universalisation, structural differentiation, and rationalisation. Instead, the results suggest growing instability within prevailing cultural frameworks and value systems, indicating a shift away from individualistic and materialistic orientations. These trends imply that social change may be better understood through cyclical rather than linear models, reflecting generational replacement or broader transformations in the cultural foundations of late modern societies.*

**Keywords:** reflexivity, modernisation trends, individualisation, societal cycles, Slovenia

## IL SIGNIFICATO DELLA RIFLESSIVITÀ NEL QUADRO DI PIÙ AMPIE TENDENZE E CICLI SOCIALI: IL CASO DELLA SLOVENIA IN UN CONTESTO GLOBALE

### SINTESI

*L'articolo analizza il declino della riflessività in Slovenia sulla base di quattro ondate di un'indagine nazionale condotta tra il 2018 e il 2024. I risultati evidenziano una riduzione costante dei livelli di riflessività, contraddicendo le aspettative lineari legate alle tendenze della modernizzazione, quali individualizzazione, universalizzazione, differenziazione strutturale e razionalizzazione. I risultati suggeriscono invece una crescente instabilità all'interno dei quadri culturali e dei sistemi di valori prevalenti, indicando un allontanamento dagli orientamenti individualistici e materialistici. Tali tendenze implicano che il cambiamento sociale possa essere compreso più adeguatamente attraverso modelli ciclici piuttosto che lineari, riflettendo il ricambio generazionale o trasformazioni più ampie nelle basi culturali delle società tardo-moderne.*

**Parole chiave:** riflessività, tendenze della modernizzazione, individualizzazione, cicli sociali, Slovenia

## INTRODUCTION

The article explores the decline of reflexivity in Slovenia within the context of wider global trends and trajectories. It shows how reflexivity relates both to the socio-cultural trends derived from established – typically linear – modernisation theories and to the cyclical perspectives on culture and society. Following the morphogenetic perspectives on society (Archer, 2017), it addresses reflexivity as a key concept for understanding how individuals act and orient themselves within the turbulent, uncertain, and unstable structural and cultural contexts of modern society, as well as when and how they contribute to systemic transformation.

This concept of reflexivity is far from novel; its philosophical roots reach back to Plato (Archer, 2013). In addressing contemporary social challenges, reflexivity has been examined by Giddens (1991) and Beck et al. (1994), who argue that the systemic processes of modernisation and individualisation exert social pressure on individuals to become increasingly reflexive. Margaret Archer, however, rejects Giddens's theory of structuration (Giddens, 1986), which posits a duality and dialectical interplay between agency and structure, whereby structural properties serve simultaneously as both the medium and the outcome of action.

On the grounds of critical realism, Archer (1995) challenges this conflation of levels and highlights the limitations of perspectives that conceptualise reflexivity merely as a generic form of self-observation (Porpora & Shumar, 2010) or as the monitoring of ongoing social activity. She also identifies similar issues in the notion of "extended reflexivity" or reflexive modernity (e.g. Beck et al., 1994). Although Beck primarily discusses systemic rather than social reflexivity, he likewise attributes reflexive capacities to individuals as a by-product of individualisation and the risks inherent in late modernity.

While Archer (2012) acknowledges that the rapid transformations of contemporary society have diminished contextual continuity and encouraged reflexivity, her morphogenetic approach cautions that "accelerated reflexivity is not an automatic consequence of reduced routinisation" (Archer, 2013, 6). This text follows the idea of morphogenetic change (cf. Archer, 2003), which takes place both at the level of society and within the individual. At the societal level, we thus speak of double morphogenesis, which dictates changes in social structures by agents, while these agents themselves simultaneously change within the same morphogenetic process. Just as we can speak of the transition from traditional society to the modern or late-modern period, each individual also passes through distinct life stages that reflect specific

changes in personality and behaviour. Viewing society and its members through the lens of morphogenetic processes enables an understanding of the dynamics of change that reflect specific contemporary socio-cultural constellations and the ways these are elaborated by actors, while also capturing their internal subjective development.

In the case of Slovenia, we explore trends in reflexivity as a signal of major changes in the trajectories of modernisation, asking whether the changes we witness represent a fundamental cultural shift – one functioning as a turning point to a new era – or merely a fluctuation within the broader modernisation process. It is not our intention to extrapolate the results from Slovenia to the European or global scale. We view our research as a national case study which could – especially when placed in a broader context provided by existing secondary data – illustrate the complex relationship between modernisation trends and cycles.

For this purpose, we combine socio-cultural trends derived from established – typically linear – modernisation theories with cyclical perspectives on culture and society offered by thinkers such as Sorokin (1992), Toynbee (1987), and Spengler et al. (1991). They emphasised that no culture, society, or civilisation is permanent or immune to a reversal of its prevailing trends, thus leading to a new cycle or era. Therefore, we approach modernisation as a specific structural and cultural order that exhibits elements of linear societal progress yet also implies significant structural changes, putting at stake the continuity of some major trends – summarised as individualisation, rationalisation, universalisation, and institutional specialisation.

In the article, we consider – and operationalise – modernisation in terms of specific structural and cultural settings upon which individuals deliberate. These can also be seen as "empirical tendencies" influencing an individual's elaboration of circumstances and the shaping of life trajectories. As Archer (2003) states, structural conditions objectively shape the situations in which individuals find themselves; however, only a person can activate the emergent powers of the social structure, which operate upon them through reflexive deliberation.

By drawing on the morphogenetic approach, we analytically distinguish between structure/culture and individual agency, despite the mutual intertwinement of all levels. Analytical dualism does not emphasise an ontological distinction between the emergent properties of each level, but rather the necessity of a methodological differentiation (Archer, 1995), which challenges the notion of direct social determinism. Each level has its own causal powers: structural forces operate automatically, while the powers of agents operate reflexively. The existence

of the individual is an objective fact, but the manner of existence is subjective (Archer, 2003, 38). Identities and life courses thus reflect belonging and self-recognition within the social context; however, the influence of the latter results from the complex interplay between individual judgements and social forces.

It is important to understand that analytical dualism is grounded in temporality. Archer emphasises in her works that social structures are historical in nature. They are largely based on past human actions rather than current intentions and goals. There are initial structural conditions (institutional framework, individual position within the social structure, and social relations) and cultural conditions (values, norms, beliefs, ideologies, and other cultural artefacts) in which individuals are situated. This process of discerning and elaborating these initial conditions occurs through reflexive thinking, which lays the groundwork for intentional action. When the elaboration of structural and cultural conditions leads to action, those actions contribute to social morphogenesis – that is, intended, reflexive social change.

The purpose of the article is therefore to shed light on emerging social and cultural patterns that are restructuring major aspects of the modernisation processes framing our society since the era of Enlightenment and the so-called Age of Reason. We consider current societal changes as potential leverage towards a new socio-cultural setting and examine reflexivity as an indicator of possible future trajectories of contemporary society. In that regard, reflexivity is considered not only as an internal dialogue of individuals but as a morphogenetic force of society, enabling individuals to become active agents (cf. Archer, 2003).

Reflexivity is thus considered an inner dialogue and intrinsic feature of the human psyche. Through the ongoing process of discernment, deliberation, and dedication occurring within their reflexive inner dialogues, individuals analyse their emotions, ideas, concerns, and motives for action. Reflexive dialogues enable humans to consciously and strategically orient their actions, activating their personal emergent properties and thereby changing the existing social structures, thus contributing to social morphogenesis (Archer, 2003).

Although everyone is reflexive, there are different modes of inner dialogue corresponding to different individual and social contexts. In traditional societies, the dominant mode of reflexivity is communicative, implying that one needs confirmation from significant others before acting. Modern society – involving dense industrialisation, urbanisation, capitalist markets, and individualisation – influences various transitions in everyday

life. Consequently, it encourages autonomous reflexivity, implying relatively self-sufficient individuals striving for personal development, successful careers, and higher social status at any cost. Contemporary social frameworks, shaped by globalisation, technology, and mobility, highlight the role of actors in understanding themselves and the world, which is reflected in the growing importance of reflexivity. As Archer (2012) notes, reflexivity has become an imperative, since contemporary social conditions no longer provide sufficient orientation for individuals' choices and practices. The dynamics and uncertainties of late modern society encourage a specific mode of critical reflexivity – termed meta-reflexivity (Archer, 2012).

One could hardly dispute that our world is marked by profound societal turbulence, including geopolitical instability, polarisation, armed conflicts, and escalating environmental crises deeply intertwined with social inequalities and the marginalisation of vulnerable groups (Donati, 2017; Green et al., 2020). In addition, increasing automation and the use of artificial intelligence create uncertainty and contribute significantly to the challenges individuals face in their daily lives as they navigate personal relationships, expectations, and life projects (Khogali & Mekid, 2023).

As everything has become increasingly unsteady and unstable in the flow of late-modern morphogenetic processes (Archer, 2017), the role of reflexivity in individuals' identities, intentions, and actions has grown (Archer, 2012; Golob & Makarovič, 2019). In this context, reflexivity can be seen as a feature of the linear progress of modernisation, closely related to individualisation, personal empowerment, and the increased uncertainties and risks of modern society (Beck & Ritter, 1992).

However, looking at some trends in reflexivity, we may ask whether we are witnessing significant shifts in socio-cultural settings. For the last ten years, we have been exploring the concept of reflexivity as articulated by Archer, emphasising that through inner dialogue individuals are able to situate themselves in relation to their social contexts, adopt certain stances towards society, and establish the micro–macro link (Archer, 2003; Golob & Makarovič, 2019; 2022).

Regardless of the different research perspectives, our study was guided by the idea that reflexivity is not only a crucial component of modernity but has become the imperative of late-modern society (Archer, 2012). Since socio-cultural settings can no longer provide constant and routine orientation in individuals' choices and practices, individuals appear obliged to become more reflexive – specifically meta-reflexive – which is particularly characteristic of youth.

However, while our research consistently confirmed the relevance of reflexivity for coping with the challenges of international mobility, social and environmental responsibility, and resisting misinformation (Golob & Makarovič, 2018; 2021; 2022; Golob et al., 2021; 2023), we could not confirm its increase over time as assumed by theory. On the contrary, after four consecutive surveys on representative national samples in Slovenia – the latest conducted in 2024 – the results revealed a trend of declining reflexivity. This trend has been too consistent to be dismissed as mere stagnation or a short-term fluctuation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This may appear insignificant, but considering the role of reflexivity as a cornerstone of modernisation trajectories, it may signal substantial turning shifts, which we explore in this paper. In doing so, we aim to identify key social and cultural changes and place them within the broader context of social, historical, economic, political, and cultural transformations that may act as catalysts for a new socio-cultural era.

In the article, we intend to:

1. Relate reflexivity to the main aspects of modernisation, identified by analysing key sociological authors, their seminal works, and perspectives.
2. Confront these trends with potential reversals indicating cyclical aspects of social change, supported by various indicators at macro-systemic and micro-societal levels within wider European and global contexts.
3. Present a study on reflexivity in Slovenia – conducted on national samples and showing trends of declining reflexivity levels and modes in four sequential studies from 2018 to 2024 – and interpret it within the context of the aforementioned trends and cycles.
4. Discuss the significance of reflexivity and its implications for the future, specifying distinct scenarios while acknowledging that long-term linear trends and cyclical changes are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

## PLACING REFLEXIVITY IN THE CONTEXTS OF MODERNISATION TRENDS

Sociological theories of modernisation have typically considered social change through the lens of relatively consistent long-term trends. While the scope of this paper does not allow us to go into all their details<sup>1</sup> it should be sufficient to briefly summarise them through the identification of four major changes directed to (1) individualisation, (2) universalism, (3) functional/structural differentiation and (4) rationalisation. At the level of individuals, all these trends are strongly related to reflexivity – both demanding and encouraging it.

**Individualisation** can be defined as an increasing emphasis on individuals' uniqueness and autonomy. It was implied in Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity, resulting from the increased division of labour, and was later elaborated through Talcott Parsons's (1977) pattern variables of individual achievement and self-orientation. Its further progression has been one of the most explicit features of late modernity, according to Ulrich Beck (1994). It is, however, a complex concept, as several authors distinguish between individualisation and individualism (Bréchon, 2021) or identify even more dimensions of the phenomenon (Fatehi et al., 2020).

All forms of individualisation are closely related to reflexivity. They inevitably imply the search for each person's unique orientations and life paths, moving beyond blind reliance on traditional practices established at the community level. Its individualistic aspect involves inner dialogues aimed at strategically choosing between established goals and means. Drawing on Archer, this implies autonomous reflexivity – such as self-orientation in the process of building one's career. Other aspects of individualisation, however, involve critical and self-critical questioning of oneself and the existing social order from an autonomous perspective in the pursuit of chosen ideals, implying meta-reflexivity, for example in various forms of social or civic activism.

<sup>1</sup> The most comprehensive classical synthesis of the theory of modernisation has been provided by Talcott Parsons: first in his classification of pattern variables (representing modernity through achievement, universalism, affective neutrality, specificity and self-orientation) (Parsons, 1951) and then through his concept of modern evolutionary universals, namely bureaucracy, universal norms, democratic association and market economy (Parsons, 1977). A contemporary adaptation of Parsons' work can be found in the work of Nikolai Genov (1997) whose four global trends include Upgrading the Rationality of Organizations, Individualisation, Spreading of Instrumental Activism and Universalization of Value-Normative Systems. The work of Parsons has also inspired the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann (2012) according to which the key feature of modern societies is high autonomy (self-reference, autopoiesis) of differentiated functional subsystems of the society. The classical understanding of modernisation as rationalisation adapted by Parsons from Max Weber (2013) has also been integrated in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and more recently in the works of Jürgen Habermas (1985) distinguishing between rational action and rational communication and in George Ritzer's (1996) critical view on McDonaldisation. The authors distinguishing between early (first) and late (second, reflexive) modernity have noted some discontinuities between the two but still emphasised the trends that are rooted in modernity in general, such as further individualisation and increased focus on managing human-induced risks (Beck et al., 1994) and globalisation (U. Beck, A. Giddens, G. Ritzer, Z. Mlinar...). A similar type of two-stage modernisation can also be noticed in the works of Ronald Inglehart who distinguishes between the shift from traditional to secular and from scarcity to expressive values.

While modernisation is supposed to make people more autonomous, it also exposes an increasing number of them to ever more similar principles. This trend can be termed **universalisation**. We define it as extending to others the same principles one claims for oneself. It was implied in Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy and its impersonal nature, which treats all individuals equally before the law and rejects privilege, discrimination, and arbitrariness. This idea became more explicit in Parsons's concepts of universalism (as opposed to particularism) and the evolutionary achievement of universal norms (Parsons, 1977). Its most notable empirical manifestations include the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, more recently, the recognition of animal rights. Planet-centric values that transcend not only human tribalisms but also anthropocentrism could be seen as its ultimate form (Golob & Makarovič, 2025).

Universalisation implies complex and profound inner dialogues that may lead individuals to expand the concept of "us" based on an increasingly inclusive framework. Communicative reflexivity plays an essential role in maintaining solidarity within an existing community by fostering concern and mutual care among its members. Meta-reflexivity, on the other hand, is essential for expanding the notion of community, belonging, and the application of common principles to an increasingly broad range of entities. It thus questions the traditional boundaries of communities based on tribalism, nationalism, patriotism, and ultimately anthropocentrism.

The autonomy of individuals finds its systemic counterpart in concepts such as functional or structural **differentiation**, or institutional specialisation. These can be defined as the increased autonomy of different institutions, spheres, or subsystems of society in defining and pursuing their own perspectives. This idea derives from Herbert Spencer's (1971) early conception of the differentiation of the societal super-organism, later developed through Parsons's concept of functional and structural differentiation of the social system (Parsons, 1977) and further elaborated by Niklas Luhmann (2012). It is also consistent with Weber's notion of diverse life-orders (Terpe, 2018). Empirical manifestations include phenomena such as secularisation (the separation of church and state), the division between household and workplace, the separation of powers, media autonomy and freedom, and distinctions between politics, the economy, and civil society.

Playing multiple social roles across various life-orders, subsystems, or institutional contexts requires high levels of reflexivity. Inner dialogue must be intensive and complex when, for example, individuals coordinate their family life, professional careers, consumer behaviour, citizenship rights,

and responsibilities. They may construct their own ways of achieving life goals by combining these spheres (applying autonomous reflexivity) or adopting priorities while pursuing their ultimate concerns (meta-reflexivity).

Finally, one of the most pronounced trends of modernisation is **rationalisation**, denoting the increasing systemic capacity to achieve maximum benefits with minimum costs. The concept draws upon the classical work of Max Weber on capitalism, bureaucracy, rational action, and rational-legal authority (Weber, 2019), Parsons's (1977) orientation of affective neutrality, the critical accounts of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2007), and more contemporary works of Habermas (2004). While rationalisation breaks with habit, tradition, and impulsive or affective behaviour, it can encourage both innovation – as in ideal capitalist entrepreneurship – and standardisation, exemplified by Weberian bureaucracy or Ritzer's concept of McDonaldisation (Ritzer, 1996).

Rational action, based on the precise evaluation of goals and means together with the consideration of costs and benefits, requires inner dialogues that transcend inertial, habitual, or emotional and impulsive behaviour. What Weber calls value-rational action (*Wertrationalität*) typically entails meta-reflexivity, rooted in one's ultimate concerns. Goal- or instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*), on the other hand, is more closely associated with autonomous reflexivity. Communicative reflexivity may also remain relevant when coordinating action with others and accounting for their potential responses.

#### CHALLENGES TO THE MODERNISATION TRENDS AND PLACING REFLEXIVITY IN THE CYCLICAL CONTEXT

Looking into the past of human societies since the beginning of recorded social and cultural organisation worldwide, one can observe that not a single one has remained stable. Civilisations have risen to their peaks and subsequently declined. Through cultural and technological diffusion, persistent historical narratives, and the remnants of declining social orders, new societies have emerged, expressing both a certain continuity with the past and the construction of novel socio-cultural settings. Societies thus exhibit an element of linearity in their progress and development while also undergoing changes that cause either minor structural shifts – enabling linearity to prevail (internal cycles within linear societal development) – or fundamental shocks that generate a new structural and cultural order (the beginning of an entirely new social cycle).

In Europe, the transition from the ancient to the medieval and subsequently to the modern period can be viewed as one of the major shifts establishing new

socio-cultural settings and fundamentally transforming the predominant forms of social organisation, as well as ways of living, thinking, and believing. There are, however, certain factors within the social, political, economic, and cultural domains that influence such shifts and can be traced back to preceding systems. These express a degree of continuity and path dependence on collapsed social systems, though they are rearranged to suit the needs of the emerging one.

While there is substantial evidence confirming long-term modernisation trends over the past two centuries or more, some more recent observations may challenge these trajectories, perhaps suggesting their deceleration or even reversal. This context is essential when interpreting our own empirical findings, which reveal not an increase but rather a slight yet steady decline in reflexivity in Slovenia.

The decline of individualism and the rise of what Foley (2017, 23) calls “new interconnectivity” can be observed in the proliferation of social networks, urban tribes, friendship groups, festivals, cosplay and gaming conventions, and other forms of group activity including dancing, choir singing, team games, and themed gatherings. Quantitatively, a potential decline of individualism in the Western world more broadly has been noted by Grant (2017), who, using the Google Books Ngram Viewer, demonstrated that individualism has already passed its peak and that we may be shifting towards an age of collective purpose. More specifically, Sadowski’s (2024) study of Germany and Poland suggests a possible “post-individualistic turn” in Central Europe, inferred from cross-generational social surveys. These shifts are consistent both with shorter generational cycles proposed by Strauss and Howe (2009) and with longer-term socio-cultural cycles such as those suggested by Pitirim Sorokin (1970).

Focusing on the history of the United States, Strauss and Howe’s (2009) generational theory of approximately 80-year-long secular cycles – each consisting of four turnings resulting from generational replacement – predicted a “crisis” turning beginning shortly after 2000, following a period of “unravelling.” While unravelling represents the peak of individualism, the crisis and subsequent “high” phases correspond to more collectivist and community-oriented attitudes. Slovenian generational dynamics cannot be completely equivalent to the American pattern, yet global interconnectivity and the significance of the USA in world affairs clearly influence Slovenian generations as well – not least through the enormous impact of American popular culture. The 2007 financial crisis, social media echo chambers, various aspects of identity politics, and right-wing populism

originated largely in the USA and subsequently diffused worldwide. Moreover, the recent crisis, which confirms Strauss and Howe’s prediction, has weakened the USA’s role in maintaining the global order, indirectly fuelling further crises such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Wars and other crises typically increase individuals’ sense of belonging to a collective rather than reinforcing independent individuality.

Long-term cycles within a single civilisation – without necessarily entailing its collapse – can also restructure the social order through shifts in value orientations, dominant cultural narratives, and moral frameworks. These dynamics were elaborated by Sorokin in his *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (1970), where he distinguishes between three cultural types through which societies rotate: (1) sensate culture, focusing on material concerns and scientific knowledge; (2) ideational culture, emphasising spiritual, religious, and non-material values; and (3) idealistic culture, blending and balancing the previous two. While, in certain civilisations, one cultural type may prevail, transitions among them can occur within a single socio-cultural order (as in ancient Greece, which experienced all three). As Sorokin stressed, every civilisation is built on a dominant value orientation that underlies all its institutions and serves as its primary premise.

The contemporary era of modern society emerged from the decline of the ideational cultural type and the ascendance of the sensate cultural orientation. Sorokin observed that Western civilisation had embraced sensate culture since the Enlightenment, reaching its peak in the twentieth century (Sorokin, 1992). What Beck and Ritter (1992) termed “first modernity” can be understood as an advanced sensate phase, in which reality is perceived through sensory experience, scientific reasoning, and the prioritisation of material needs, culminating in excessive consumerism, pleasure seeking, and wealth accumulation. As already discussed, the dominant mode of reflexivity in this period corresponds to autonomous reflexivity, in which individuals prioritise financial prosperity, personal development, and career success, following a zero-sum logic and deliberating according to instrumental rationality (Archer, 2012). This mode undermines social cohesion and downplays the values of relationships, creativity, and environmental stewardship in favour of material gain.

The saturation of sensate material culture and the decline of religious or spiritual meaning have created a profound imbalance in the social order, leading to a transition towards ideational or idealistic culture (Sorokin, 1992). This aligns with late-modern society, in which individuals

again search for deeper meaning. There is growing interest in spirituality and mindfulness as people seek alternatives to materialism and impersonal, technologically driven life. The situational logic of competition and the institutional hegemony of the market and the state (Archer, 2012) have been increasingly challenged by meta-reflexivity, which is rooted in value-based ultimate concerns. Individuals deliberate in non-zero-sum ways, critically examining existing social orders, stimulating social morphogenesis, and transforming prevailing social and cultural structures. This process provides fertile ground for new cultural ideas. As Carrigan (2013) suggests, the current search for alternative cultural systems and socio-cultural experimentations enables meta-reflexive individuals to pursue value orientations grounded in ideational distinctiveness and normative attentiveness. Meta-reflexivity is also compatible with sustainability values and practices (Golob & Makarovič, 2022), representing a potential shift away from individualisation.

A tentative turn towards collective purposes may also reflect a growing challenge to universalism. The revival of in-group solidarity based on family, neighbourhood, ethnicity, political affiliation, or social media communities often occurs at the expense of out-groups, resulting in a shift from universalistic to more particularistic patterns. Such dynamics may correspond with declining reflexivity levels – particularly meta-reflexivity – since understanding, empathising with, and collaborating among those similar to oneself requires less reflexive engagement than interacting within inclusive and diverse communities, such as humanity or the planet as a whole.

The prioritisation of a single group, single purpose, or appeals to “the will of the people” (however defined) characterises the current global rise of populism and the erosion of democratic principles such as the separation of powers within the wider trend of autocratisation (Nord et al., 2025). This runs counter to the principles of structural and functional differentiation and the corresponding autonomy of institutions. The potential decline of institutional specialisation and socio-political checks and balances both depend upon and encourage reduced reflexivity among individuals, who are instead expected to conform to collective – or, more precisely, leaders’ – views.

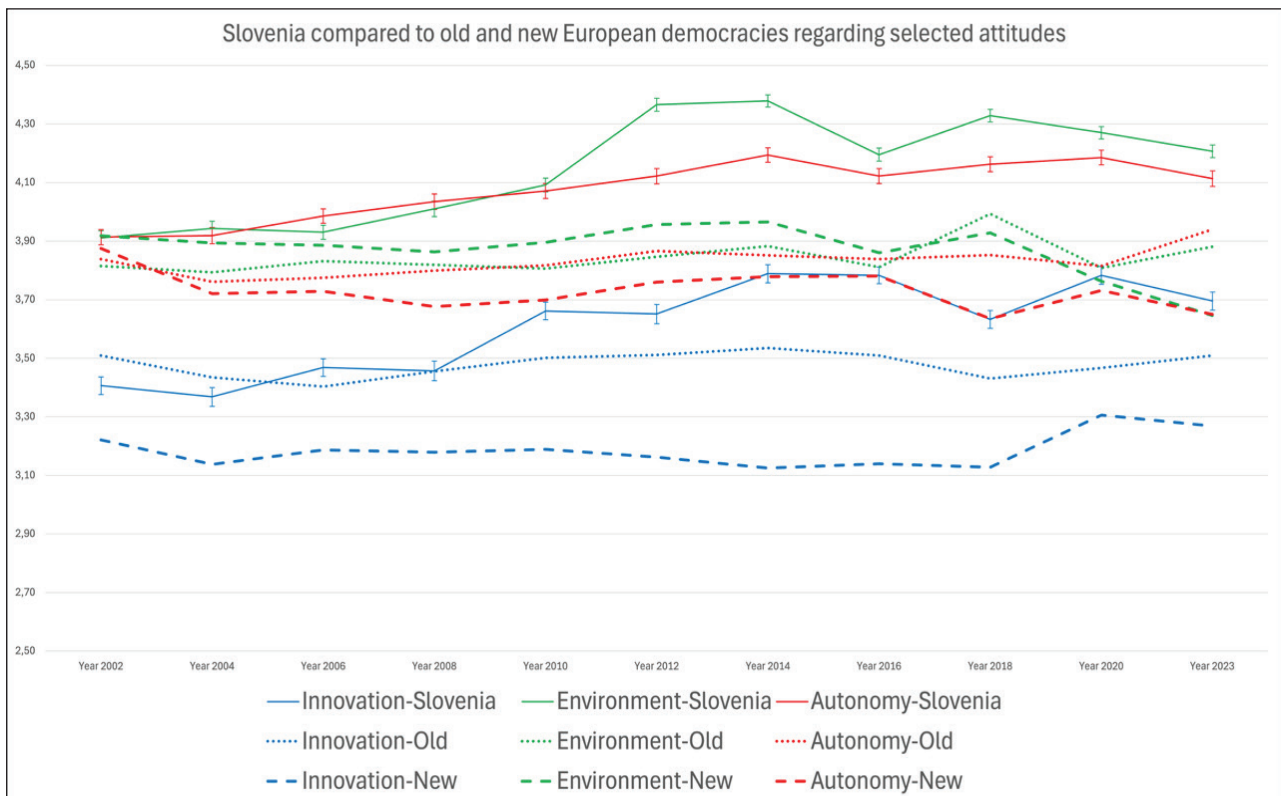
Finally, the rationalisation trend and its consequences appear far from straightforward. When rationality fosters innovation, it correlates with higher levels of reflexivity, as innovation both requires and stimulates adaptive reflexive capacity. Yet there is another side to rationalisation, depicted most clearly in Ritzer’s concepts of McDonaldisation

(Ritzer, 1996) and the “globalisation of nothing” (Ritzer & Ryan, 2002), characterised by extreme standardisation hostile to diversity and creativity. The dominance of standardisation over innovation diminishes both reflexivity and meta-reflexivity. Although global evidence remains ambiguous, some indicators point to de-innovation tendencies – including declining numbers of innovation-driven enterprises in high-income countries and the replacement of major breakthroughs with incremental improvements (Mousa, 2024). A major study found a significant decline in groundbreaking discoveries across all scientific fields, with the average disruptiveness of papers dropping by more than 90 per cent between 1945 and 2010 (Park et al., 2023).

More specifically, according to the Global Innovation Index, Slovenia reached its peak innovation performance relative to other countries in 2012 (Dutta et al., 2024). Since then, scores have fluctuated and ultimately declined – from 49.9 in 2012 to 40.2 in 2024. Although one must be cautious before drawing firm conclusions, the correlation between declining reflexivity and diminishing innovation may not be purely coincidental.

Cross-national and cross-sectional social surveys addressing modernisation and post-modernisation do not offer unambiguous results regarding long-term trends or cycles. The most recent wave of the European Values Study was conducted in 2017 (EVS, 2022; Haerpfer et al., 2022). While it recorded peak levels of postmodern values for Slovenia at that time, no comparable data are available for the subsequent period. However, certain Schwartz value items incorporated into the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2025) provide preliminary indications of ongoing value shifts and enable positioning the Slovenian case within a broader European context (cf. Chart 1).

Attitudes towards innovation (“it is important to think up new ideas and be creative”), environment (“she/he strongly believes that people should care for nature. Looking after the environment is important to her/him”) and individual autonomy (“it is important to her/him to make her/his own decisions about what she/he does. She/He likes to be free and not depend on others”) are interesting proxies in this regard. In terms of attitudes the mean for Slovenia (denoted in Chart 1 with appropriate error-bars to differentiate real change from standard error-based intervals) have been mostly more comparable to European old democracies (democratic before the end of 1980s) than to the new ones. However, Slovenia seems to be closer to the rest of the new ones in the patterns of change. From this perspective, it indicates a peak of modern values around 2014 – but a combination of stagnation or even decline after that. A statistically significant decline from 2020 to 2023 can be noticed for all observed items in the Slovenian case.



**Chart 1: Changes in selected attitudes from Schwartz questionnaire in Slovenia, old and new European democracies (Source: ESS ERIC, 2025 and own calculations – the scales are reversed from the original so that higher values denote higher presence of a given attitude).**

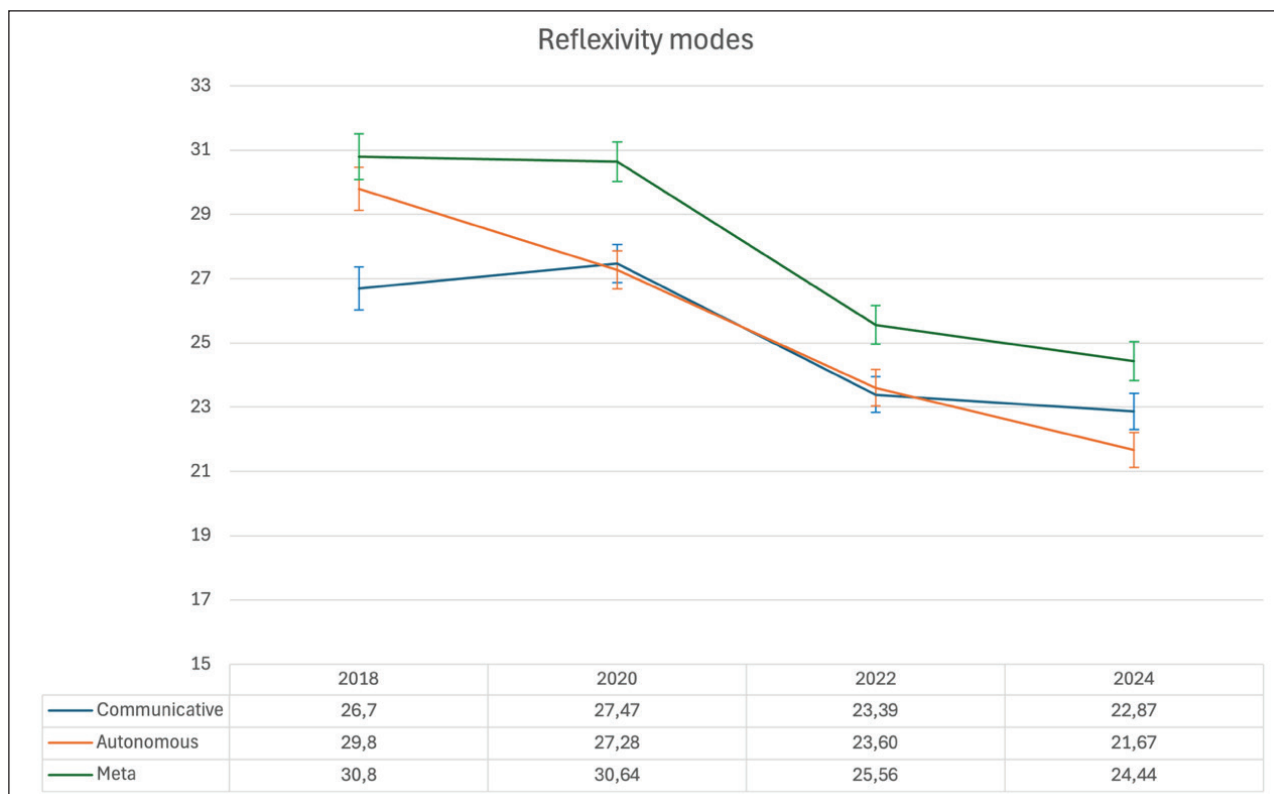
EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON THE RECENT TRENDS IN REFLEXIVITY IN SLOVENIA

Our empirical study consists of four consecutive social surveys conducted on representative national samples of the Slovenian adult population every two years from 2018 to 2024. Each survey wave included adult respondents: 715 in 2018, 904 in 2020, 912 in 2022, and 908 in 2024. Data were collected using the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) method. All survey waves employed the same methodology and are therefore directly comparable. However, since they do not include the same respondents, they should be considered repeated cross-sectional surveys rather than panel data.

In all surveys, we applied the RMT question battery consisting of five items serving as a proxy for reflexivity levels, ranging from 0 (no reflexivity) to 20 (full reflexivity). The RMT has been described and tested in detail in our previous research (Golob & Makarovič, 2019). For the purposes of this paper, we briefly summarise that the items included in this scale measure the frequency of the following behaviours:

- Planning one’s own future.
- Rehearsing what one would say in an important conversation.
- Imagining the best and worst consequences of a major decision.
- Reviewing a conversation that ended badly.
- Clarifying thoughts about an issue, person, or problem.

The RMT scale has been rigorously developed and tested for validity and reliability in our earlier qualitative (Golob, 2017) and quantitative (Golob & Makarovič, 2019; 2021) studies. It represents an adapted version of Archer’s original quantitative tool, ICONI (Archer, 2007), addressing concerns raised about its validity (Meriton, 2016) and internal reliability (Dyke et al., 2012). Its development followed an exploratory-sequential model tested through: (1) a series of qualitative interviews with Slovenian students designed to validate the subsequent quantitative instrument (Golob, 2017); (2) a pilot test on a convenience sample of Slovenian students; (3) a pilot application of the reflexivity measure in an online media survey within the project *Innovative Approaches*



**Chart 2: Trends in the scores for reflexivity modes in Slovenia.**

to Encouraging Responsible and Pluralist Media in Slovenia; (4) an online survey among Slovenian students participating in Erasmus mobility, as well as convenience samples of students from Lebanon and the USA (Golob & Makarovič, 2018); and (5) several subsequent applications to nationally representative samples (Golob et al., 2021; 2023; Golob & Makarovič, 2019; 2021; 2022).

The internal consistency of the RMT as a measure of reflexivity levels has been confirmed by Cronbach's alpha coefficients calculated separately for each survey wave, ranging from 0.72 in 2018 to 0.78 in 2024, and 0.76 for the combined dataset. The one-dimensionality of the construct was also validated through factor analyses conducted separately for each wave and for the pooled dataset, consistently yielding single-factor solutions.

A small but statistically significant and consistent decline in reflexivity levels can be observed in the Slovenian adult population, with a Cohen's  $d$  of 0.28. Mean reflexivity levels decreased from 10.5 in 2018 to 10.4 in 2020, 9.51 in 2022, and 9.38 in 2024. While the results from the 2020 and 2022 surveys – conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic – may have been partially affected by the health crisis and are therefore inconclusive in isolation, the 2024 survey (conducted in March)

reflects post-pandemic conditions. Despite the relatively small effect size, the pattern appears consistent and meaningful, particularly considering that parameters such as basic value orientations typically change slowly. We can therefore cautiously infer a negative trend indicating a gradual decline in reflexivity levels in Slovenia.

The second part of the RMT question battery provides proxy quantitative scores for reflexivity modes. These scores, ranging between 0 (minimum) and 80 (maximum), are calculated as the product of reflexivity levels and the Likert-scale responses corresponding to the frequency of the following behaviours:

1. Making "important decisions with the full agreement and support of people close to you only" (communicative reflexivity).
2. Making "important decisions based on your own best judgement regardless of what others think or say" (autonomous reflexivity).
3. Considering "the key priorities of your life and why you are doing what you are doing" (meta-reflexivity).

Given the overall decline in reflexivity levels, it is unsurprising that the scores for all modes also declined consistently and significantly (cf. Chart 2). However,

there are notable differences between modes. In 2018, when the first survey was conducted, results for Slovenia corresponded closely to what would be expected in a late-modern society according to Archer’s theory: meta-reflexivity yielded the highest scores as the prevailing mode of late modernity, followed by the more classically modern autonomous reflexivity. Communicative reflexivity, typical of more traditional societies, was still present but represented the weakest of the three.

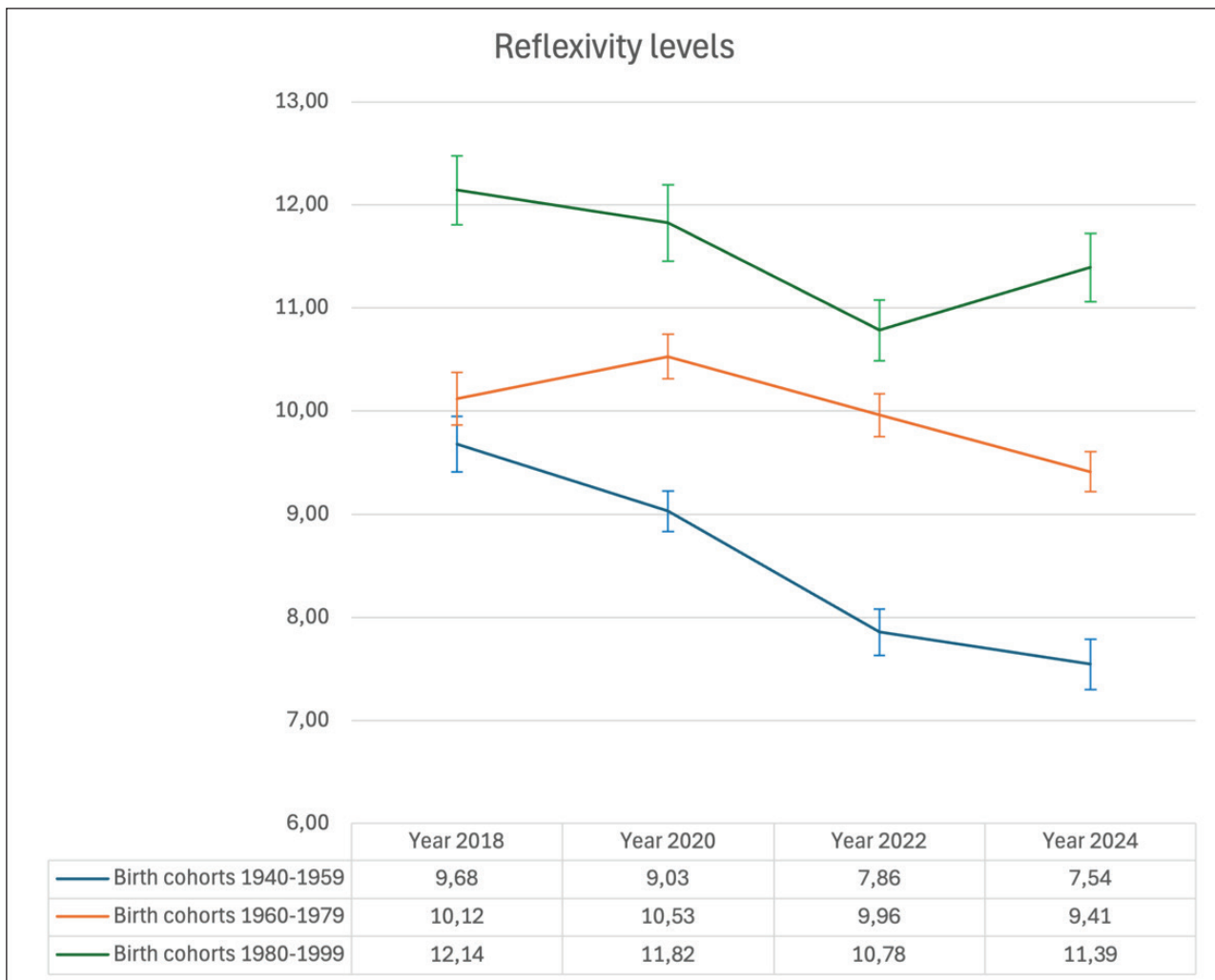
Subsequent surveys showed gradual, but consistent decline of meta-reflexivity for more than 6 points. Perhaps even more interesting, however, is the shift between autonomous and communicative reflexivity: while both have declined, the decline has been much greater for autonomous reflexivity (more than 8 points), while the communicative one only declined for less than 4 points. The relative significance of autonomous

reflexivity has thus declined relatively to the communicative one – suggesting increased significance of others (community) for individual’s decision and thus a shift away from the self-orientation and the assumed individualisation trends.

We have applied linear regression analyses to test the relationships between reflexivity on the one hand and demographic and technological variables on the other hand from 2020 to 2024. The variables included gender, age, educational level, as well as income and the frequency of engagement with digital technologies, including using them for work or formal education, informal learning or following news, social media and playing videogames. The 2018 survey wave is omitted here because it did not include information about income and intensity of using digital technologies. Standardised coefficients

**Table 1: Regression coefficients and diagnostics for the variables related to reflexivity levels from 2020 to 2024.**

		Pooled OLS 2020–2024	2020 only	2022 only	2024 only
Standardised (beta) regression coefficients	Using on-line social networks	0.08	0.13	0.08	-
	Playing video games	-	-0.72	-	-
	Using digital technologies for work or formal learning	0.11	0.12	0.16	-
	Using digital technologies for informal learning and news	0.06	-	-	0.09
	Age	-0.19	-0.12	-0.16	-0.27
	Tertiary education	0.11	0.16	0.09	0.09
	Income	0.04	-	-	0.10
	Wave effect: 2022 compared to 2020	-0.12	/	/	/
	Wave effect: 2024 compared to 2020	-0.12			
Note: Coefficients are only listed when significance $\leq 0.05$ ; blank space ( - ) denotes significance $> 0.05$					
Determination coefficient (R <sup>2</sup> )		0.16	0.14	0.15	0.18
Breusch-Pagan / Cook-Weisberg test for heteroskedasticity (H <sub>0</sub> : constant variance)		0.153	0.867	0,053*	0.605
Mean variance inflation factor (VIF)		1.35	1.37	1.29	1.32
Maximum variance inflation factor (VIF)		1.53	1.69	1.53	1.43
* As heteroscedasticity cannot be clearly rejected for the 2022 wave, an additional model was created with robust std. errors – but this has not produced any relevant change in terms of significance levels.					



**Chart 3: Reflexivity levels of birth cohorts in Slovenia.**

based on OLS regression analyses together with the key diagnostics are presented in Table 1.<sup>2</sup>

The most consistent factors associated with reflexivity levels across all survey waves are age and education. Younger respondents have consistently shown higher levels of reflexivity than older ones, and individuals with tertiary education have been consistently more reflexive than those with lower educational attainment. These patterns were already identified and discussed in our earlier research (Golob & Makarovič, 2019).

In more recent years, income level has also emerged as a significant factor. In 2024, individuals with higher incomes were significantly more likely to display higher reflexivity levels. This finding may suggest that reflexivity, amid its gradual overall decline, is becoming less universal and increasingly dependent on social stratifica-

tion. Gender, by contrast, appears to have declined in relevance. In our first survey conducted in 2018 (Golob & Makarovič, 2019), women were statistically more reflexive than men; however, this difference was no longer observed in the subsequent survey waves.

The relationship between reflexivity and the use of digital technologies has also evolved over time. In 2020 and 2022, the use of digital technologies for work or formal learning was positively associated with higher reflexivity levels. By 2024, however, this relationship had disappeared, possibly because such use had become nearly universal and was no longer a matter of individual choice. On the other hand, in 2024, the use of digital technologies for informal learning and following news became a statistically significant correlate of reflexivity levels.

<sup>2</sup> Introducing interactions between waves and individual independent variables in the pooled OLS model causes severe colinearity problems as indicated by VIF. Consequently, to illustrate the wave effects on the coefficients, we also provide regression models separately for each wave.

An analysis of reflexivity by birth cohorts (Chart 3) reveals two forms of decline: a decrease across life cycles (intragenerational change based on individual life courses) and a more general intergenerational decline (reflecting broader social change). Individuals born between 1940 and 1959 experienced the transition into retirement – many were already retired by the first survey, and most by the last. This shift corresponds to a consistent decrease in both their overall reflexivity levels and in all specific modes of reflexivity.

Those born between 1960 and 1979, broadly corresponding to Generation X, were at the mature stages of their professional careers. The decline in their reflexivity levels was still statistically significant but less pronounced and less linear. In 2020, they even exhibited a temporary increase in overall reflexivity, particularly in communicative and meta-reflexivity (while their autonomous reflexivity remained largely unchanged). This short-term rise may have been linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, which temporarily encouraged more communicative reflexivity for life coordination and meta-reflexive reassessment of personal and social contexts. After 2020, however, this cohort also exhibited a gradual but steady decline in both overall reflexivity levels and in all reflexivity modes.

The youngest cohorts observed in our study – those born between 1980 and 1999 – were either at the early stages of their professional careers or, particularly in the earlier survey waves, in transition from education to employment. While their reflexivity levels also declined slightly between 2018 and 2024, the decrease was not entirely consistent. Their communicative reflexivity remained relatively stable, falling only marginally from 29.5 in 2018 to 28.0 in 2024, with even slight increases noted in 2020 and 2022. By contrast, their autonomous and meta-reflexivity exhibited steady and statistically significant declines of 7.6 and 6.7 points respectively.

Given the relationship between reflexivity and individuals' life cycles, these changes are not unexpected. Entering adulthood, engaging in intensive social life, and making crucial decisions regarding education, career paths, partnerships, and family organisation typically require more frequent and complex inner dialogues than the later stages of life approaching retirement (Ule & Kuhar, 2003; Golob & Makarovič, 2021). Margaret Archer's (2012) theoretical framework also suggests that younger (i.e. newer) cohorts should display higher reflexivity due to the increasingly dynamic character of morphogenetic, modernising societies, implying intergenerational shifts towards greater reflexivity. However, our results do not support this expectation. Younger generations do not appear sufficiently reflexive to offset the decline among older cohorts, leading to an overall reduction in reflexivity that seems rooted not only in life-course dynamics

but also in broader, long-term societal cycles. We can therefore argue that younger generations are more reflexive because they are *young* (life-course effect), yet we cannot confirm that they are more reflexive because they are *new* (a result of modernising social change). Although none of the shifts in reflexivity levels or modes are dramatic – and despite the relatively short observation period – the absence of any upward trend consistent with modernisation theories calls for re-evaluation of linear perspectives on social change and underscores the need to integrate cyclical explanations. Further research extending over a longer timeframe will be necessary before more definitive conclusions can be reached.

## DISCUSSION

The decline in reflexivity in Slovenia between 2018 and 2024, as indicated by our findings, corresponds with the deterioration of several modernisation-related attitudes reported in the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2025; cf. Chart 1). Alongside similar cross-national longitudinal studies, the ESS suggests that Slovenia – though a relatively well-developed new European democracy – is not an exception in its values and trajectories of change. While the Slovenian case cannot be generalised to the entire continent, it serves as an illustrative example of the complexity of social transformation, especially when situated within a broader theoretical and empirical framework. The correspondence between value shifts in the ESS and the decline in reflexivity in our data also provides additional validity to our findings.

In our previous work, we demonstrated that high levels of reflexivity are not universal but depend partly on individuals' social positions – particularly on education, age, and gender (Golob & Makarovič, 2019). At present, the ability to engage in strong reflexivity appears increasingly linked to privilege rather than serving as a general human feature. This is particularly evident in the rising significance of income as a determinant of reflexivity. If reflexivity is becoming less self-evident, this raises major concerns surrounding social inequality. Even within relatively egalitarian Slovenian society, wealth disparities have grown substantially over recent decades (World Inequality Data, 2024), with the wealth-based Gini coefficient increasing from 55.1 in 2010 to 64.4 in 2021 (Eurofound, 2025). Therefore, broader trends of wealth growth do not necessarily imply greater reflexivity and might, in fact, coincide with its decline.

The observed decline – or, at best, stagnation if one adopts a conservative methodological perspective due to small effect sizes – appears inconsistent with linear modernisation theories positing continual advancement towards late modernity. Instead, it aligns more closely with theoretical and empirical perspectives that recognise

reversals or inflections in previously dominant trends. Lower reflexivity levels and relatively weaker autonomous reflexivity compared to communicative reflexivity are consistent with a shift from individual to collective orientations, as observed by Sadowski (2024), Grant (2017), Foley (2017), and anticipated by Strauss and Howe (2009). Prioritising collective rather than individual orientations generally requires less reflexivity, favouring communicative over autonomous and meta-reflexive modes. A reduced capacity for critical evaluation of collective orientations also corresponds with declining meta-reflexivity. While a move away from egoistic individualism may appear encouraging (Bréchon, 2021), challenges to individual autonomy resulting from online echo chambers, populism, and various forms of tribalism are concerning. This trend likely relates to diminishing meta-reflexivity, as critical deliberation gives way to conformity with collective or leadership-driven sentiments.

A pertinent question concerns whether this shift toward more collectivist and less reflexive orientations is influenced by technological development. Digital media, excessive internet use, and video gaming have often been blamed for declining literacy, learning difficulties, and reduced autonomous critical thinking (Bréchon, 2021), which could plausibly contribute to lower reflexivity and meta-reflexivity. Yet, our empirical data neither confirm nor refute these claims. In fact, the correlations between reflexivity and technology use for informal learning or following news are positive. No statistically significant negative relationships were found between reflexivity and time spent on social media or gaming. This suggests that the association with technology may be indirect and possibly embedded within broader social transformations that would likely occur even without digital mediation.

This observation leads to theoretical frameworks of cyclical social change, which emphasise the recurrence of historical patterns rather than the perpetual continuation of linear progress. The decline in reflexivity is fully compatible with Strauss and Howe's (2009) generational model, in which approximately 20-year phases ("turnings") of "awakening" and "unravelling" foster greater reflexivity, while "crisis" and subsequent "high" phases favour stability and collective order. The ongoing global "crisis" phase – beginning with the 2007 financial collapse, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and extended through geopolitical conflicts and challenges to the rule-based international order – supports this cyclical interpretation. The character and ideals of the coming "high" phase, however, remain uncertain.

Our findings also resonate with Sorokin's long-term cultural cycles, implying a shift away from the sensate (materialistic) cultural type – which reached its peak according to Sorokin (1992) – towards alternative orientations. Phenomena such as "new age" spiritual revivals (Lassander, 2009) and the post-materialist turn (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005) lend partial support

to Sorokin's interpretation, although their ultimate trajectories are yet to be determined. The combination of unprecedented technological progress and rapid structural transformation has produced a fragmented and unstable cultural environment in which coherent value systems struggle to take root. As Archer (2017) observed, we now inhabit an "anormative" society – one where culture, as a compass of social norms, values, and shared meanings, increasingly lags behind structural change.

Meta-reflexivity possesses the potential to transcend the boundaries of established narratives, ideologies, and identities by articulating new normative ideals. As Archer (2003) explained, it requires an ultimate concern – a driving cultural ideal – capable of orienting individuals' deliberations and actions. Thus, meta-reflexivity, as the impetus for individuals' engagement with socio-cultural contexts, may serve as a key driver in transitioning from the overextended sensate culture towards a new synthesis resembling Sorokin's "idealistic" culture, balancing material rationalism with spiritual and moral values. However, the absence of meta-reflexivity indicated in our study could have alternative – and less favourable – consequences. Rather than yielding an "idealistic" balance, it could precipitate ideological, political, or religious dogmatism – an ideational culture in Sorokin's sense – potentially leading to a breakdown of existing civilisation, echoing Toynbee's model of cyclical genesis, growth, decline, and collapse.

The interaction between autonomous and communicative reflexivity can largely be viewed as an adaptation to varying social contexts – more individualistic or more collectivistic respectively. Both can coexist with, and even complement, the four broad modernisation trends discussed in this paper. Increased individual autonomy can coexist with strong collective solidarities; collective orientations may evolve into broader universalism encompassing planetary values; spiritual engagement need not contradict secular political rationality; and the synthesis of rationality and spirituality lies at the core of Sorokin's idealistic society. In this respect, what we may be witnessing is not a complete departure from modernisation but the beginning of a new cyclical phase within its broader trajectory of individualisation, universalisation, differentiation, and rationalisation.

Nonetheless, the presence of meta-reflexivity remains critical. Any rebalancing of existing modernisation trends and cycles into a new synthesis requires elaborated morphogenetic social change, which fundamentally depends on meta-reflexivity. Future research should therefore focus explicitly on this dimension. Given that our empirical findings are based on a single national case study and a relatively short timeframe, further longitudinal and cross-national research will be essential to confirm these patterns and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of reflexivity within evolving socio-cultural dynamics.

POMEN REFLEKSIVNOSTI V OKVIRU ŠIRŠIH DRUŽBENIH TRENDOV IN CIKLOV:  
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## POVZETEK

Članek raziskuje upad refleksivnosti v Sloveniji v kontekstu globalnih trendov in premikov. Pokaže, kako je refleksivnost povezana tako z dolgoročnimi trendi, izhajajočimi iz uveljavljenih – običajno linearnih – teorij modernizacije, kot tudi s cikličnimi pogledi na kulturo in družbo. Empirično se naslanja na nacionalno raziskavo, ki vključuje štiri zaporedne ankete, izvedene na reprezentativnih vzorcih odraslega slovenskega prebivalstva v letih od 2018–2024. Upad refleksivnosti je v nasprotju z modernizacijskimi trendi individualizacije, univerzalizacije, strukturne diferenciacije in racionalizacije ter je bolj skladen s trditvami, da se družba sooča z nestabilnostmi v prevladujočih kulturnih okoljih in naracijah, kar lahko nakazuje pomemben premik od individualističnih in materialističnih vrednotnih usmeritev. Ti izsledki podpirajo ciklično razlago v smislu generacijskih ali dolgoročnih kulturnih sprememb in poudarjajo pomen meta-refleksivnosti kot specifičnega načina refleksivnosti. Ta način je mogoče razumeti kot ključen za vzpostavitev bolj stabilnega ravnotežja med modernizacijskimi trendi in odmikom od pretiranega individualizma in materializma – ob hkratnem preprečevanju zdrsa v izključujoče ideološke fanatizme in s tem povezano uničenje modernosti. Članek ponuja implikacije za prihodnost, pri čemer navaja različne scenarije in hkrati priznava, da dolgoročni linearni trendi in ciklične spremembe niso nujno medsebojno izključujoči.

**Ključne besede:** refleksivnost, modernizacijski trendi, individualizacija, družbeni cikli, Slovenija

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